

CULINARY SOLIDARITY

A brief compendium of Depression Era
food history, recipes, and jargon

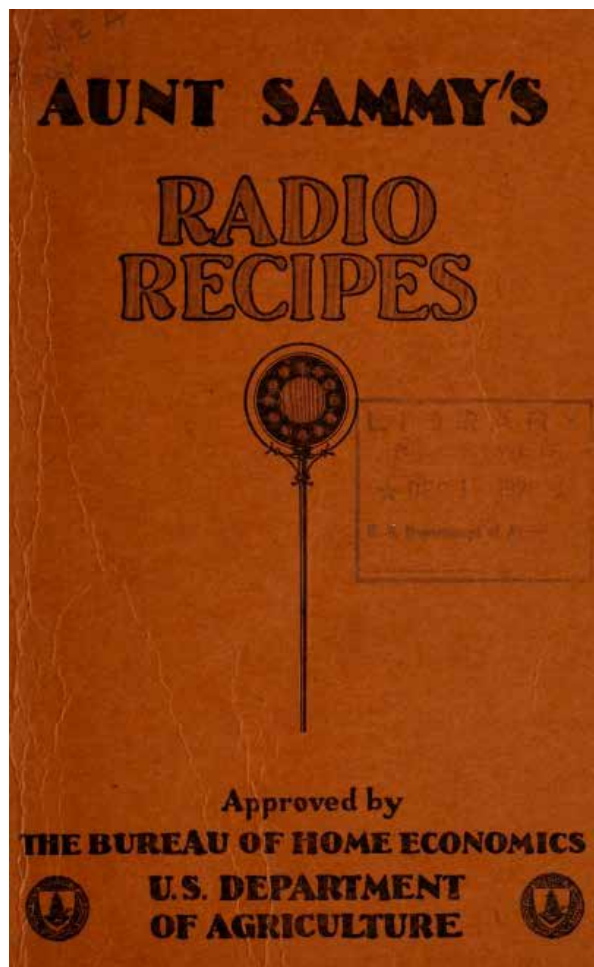


I LOVE FOOD.

Not just because I like to eat, which I definitely do. Food fascinates me. Food is where culture, ecology, identity, and economics all intersect. Food is inescapably political.

Food changed profoundly in the early 20th century. One of the biggest contributing factors was the sudden increase in cross-country travel, thanks to the development of the interstate highway system and the growth of the airline industry. Before this, food was highly regional in the United States. Regional cuisines naturally developed around two key factors: locally available ingredients and the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the area's settlers.

Modern American food practices and attitudes toward food are, for better or worse, rooted in the government policies of the Depression Era. Free school lunches, food stamps, agricultural subsidies, and federal nutrition guidelines are all products of government relief efforts that began in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s.



By the 1930s, food had become an expression of socio-economic solidarity. Ousted president Herbert Hoover was notorious for requesting extravagant meals brimming with imported luxury foods during the height of the Depression, and when he left the White House, incoming First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt made a point of implementing an extremely modest, home-spun menu. The general public lauded this effort, but Washington politicians appreciated it less so. There are countless anecdotes of visiting diplomats being told to eat before going to state dinners, because the food was laughably bad—so much so that even FDR used to sneak in outside food. The recipes that Eleanor Roosevelt had her chef make were based in part around guidelines and serving suggestions from “Aunt Sammy,” a reassuring radio personality created by the government’s home economics bureau. (Her name was, of course, designed to imply she was the feminine counterpart of Uncle Sam.)



Although it no longer exists, the Bureau of Home Economics became one of the few places within the government where women had authority. Hundreds of women, hired as researchers in the fields of nutrition and recipe development, suddenly found themselves well-paid for their homemaking skills.

Aunt Sammy's recipes were not always designed to be delicious. The goal was to deliver as much nutrition as frugally as possible. While most of the recipes are quite simple and inoffensive, some of them are a little more inventive.

More on this later.

FOOD, WEAPONIZED.

Federal food relief programs were a blessing, but sometimes became a means for local officials to blatantly act upon their prejudices. African-Americans and poor white sharecroppers in the South found rations withheld from them, their wealthy employers using it as a means of extorting manual labor. Rations were utilized by some communities as a strategy to force Italian, Mexican and other immigrant families to abandon their native cuisines and assimilate into mainstream American food culture.

During the early years of the relief programs, extreme vetting and intense scrutiny of recipients made the registration process incredibly difficult and utterly humiliating. Relief recipients were subject to random home inspections; a family's rations could be stripped away by an inspector if the man of the house wasn't present (because it meant he was out working or otherwise earning money somehow), or if a woman's housedress or a child's trousers looked too new (because it meant the family was secretly spending money on fabric or clothing), or even if the house looked too clean or structurally intact. Recipients of government relief were expected to be pious and pitiable caricatures of abject poverty. If you were anything less, you were unworthy of help.

Further reading: *A Square Meal: A Culinary History of the Great Depression*, Coe & Ziegelman, 2016

FOOD, DOCUMENTED.



The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created by Executive Order of President Roosevelt in 1935. Although the WPA is most famous for its public infrastructure and arts initiatives, one of its lesser known projects was the rigorous documentation of American food culture. Journalists and writers, working under the umbrella of the WPA's Federal Writers' Project, were asked to report on regional cuisines and recipes. The project, titled *America Eats*, enlisted such talents as Zora Neale Hurston and Eudora Welty, but sadly, the effort was abandoned at the onset of WWII.

What follows are a few memorable reports issued by various writers. For more detail, I highly recommend reading *The Food of a Younger Land: The WPA's Portrait of Food in Pre-World War II America* by Mark Kurlansky, from which these excerpts were taken.

Depression Cake

MICHAEL KENNEDY AND EDWARD B. REYNOLDS

This is from the Far West Eats regional essay. It is the story of the creation of Depression Cake, an eggless, butterless concoction born out of necessity by a young woman preparing for a July 4 "picnic, rodeo, and general get-together."

Eggs! She had none. The few hens she possessed were either burdened with the responsibility of baby chicks, or setting on eggs, dispositions ruined and cross-eyed with chagrin over confinement and hot weather.

Butter and milk! Ye Gods! Old Stubby had taken a leave of absence and followed a herd of whitefaces that were grazing over the West Fork, having observed a fine gentleman among them who appealed to her fickle heart. Ethel must remember to have Nick go after her right after the Fourth.

Ethel looked at the pan of raisins stewing on the stove. An idea entered her mind: it was worth trying, and she could experiment on her husband and brother. Necessity was the mother of invention.

When the raisins had partially cooled, she carefully measured a cup of the juice and poured them into a mixing bowl, adding a teaspoon of soda, a half a teaspoonful of cinnamon and nutmeg, a pinch of cloves, ginger

and allspice. A heaping tablespoon of bacon drippings went next, and she watched the mixture bubble and froth, wondering if the stuff would explode. She sifted one and three fourths cups of common flour and a cup of sugar, a pinch of salt and a teaspoonful of baking powder, added them to the volcanic mass in her mixing bowl. After a moment of hesitation, she put in a teaspoonful of flavoring. What was it? A cake or pudding? She did not know.

After greasing and flouring a loaf cake tin, she spread the batter in the pan. And closing her eyes, prayed fervently as she closed the oven door. Spices—no odor from the old world ever smelled more delicious. The cake—for by all the Gods it was a cake—had risen, round, light, brown, shrinking away from the pan, proclaiming to the world that it was sufficiently baked.

No modern chef ever carried a brainchild more carefully or more proudly than Ethel when she placed the cake to cool. Her creation appeared beautiful, but how would it taste?

When the men came in weary and hungry from work, they were greeted at the door with the odor of that cake, which held the place of honor in the center of the table.

“How?” asked the man of the house, well aware of the lack of provisions.

“Eat it first,” answered Ethel. “I’m afraid to talk.”

After the cake had been eaten to the last crumb, the brother inquired cautiously, “Gosh, Ethel. Do you reckon you can do it again?”

Ethel nodded assent. The Fourth of July celebration was a success, and that’s how “Depression Cake” came into being.



A Los Angeles Sandwich Called a Taco

DON DOLAN

Naturally, the Mexican influence pervades southern California sandwiches. Given the Mexican *tortilla*—the plate-sized wafer of powdered corn—along with beans and chili, and you have the ingredients for a sandwich called a *taco*: a *tortilla* fluttered through hot grease, folded around shrimp, sausage, and chili stew, garnished with shredded lettuces and grated cheese. A finger-size *taco* from Olvera Street bears the baby name of *taquito*.

Another variety, the *tostadita*, results when a small *tortilla* is toasted deep brown, edges crimped in a ridge around the filling, arranged on the plate with shredded lettuce and sliced radishes, and served steaming hot.

Chalupa means a canoe for two . . . soft night—rippling water—a man and a maid. But even love feels the pangs of hunger, so a *chalupa* becomes a curled-edge *tortilla* fresh from sizzling fat, filled with beans, avocado, green chili, minced onions, chili stew, and sprayed with a piquant tomato sauce. Romance thrives on that.

The *burrito*, simplest Mexican sandwich, calls for a *tortilla* wrapped like a jelly roll around beans. Or, more elaborately, it takes the form of a club sandwich filled with avocado and the white meat of chicken.

Los Angeles—American edition—retains the art of the sandwich; in so doing, it is guilty on at least three counts of providing the piece de resistance of an eat-and-run meal.

Of these, two came from restaurateur De Forest, whose colorful business name evolved from the jests of customers. It metamorphosed from "T. N. De Forest" through "Female Tommy" to "Texas Female Tommy's Ptomaine Tabernacle," whence it crystallized into the unforgettable "Ptomaine Tommy's."

"Size" was the happy thought born of hunger in Ptomaine Tommy. Proprietor of a lunch wagon in 1915, on the North Broadway fringe of Mexican town, he of necessity provided his own board—and became very tired tasting the few available dishes. In a need of pure experiment he strewed chili and beans over a hamburger steak, and covered the whole with chopped onions.

Curious customers saw it, asked for it, liked it, and then demanded it. They would order, from the degree of their hunger, according to how big a cake they wished of the ground beef which forms the basis of the dish. Thus, "hamburger size" or "steak size." The name generally settled to "size," with the larger version becoming an "oversize," and the Ptomaine Tommy sprinkling of chopped onions on it, called a "shower." "Size" remains the chef-d'oeuvre of the new restaurant to which it gave birth, and has been widely copied.

Trial and error also produced the Ptomaine Tommy specialty of "Egg Royal Decorated." A butter-fried mixture of egg and ground beef—seemingly known as Denver or Western sandwich—is "decorated" with chili beans.

From Los Angeles comes the "French-dipped" sandwich, a quick lunch developed to satisfy the appetites of hard-working factory hands. Two Italian brothers named Martin, who in 1921 operated a day-and-night sawdust-floored delicatessen-counter restaurant under the French name of "Philippe's," were the creators. From an *au jus* base they

concocted a sauce from a secret Philippe formula. Generous slices of good roast meat are spread on half a fresh-baked French (longish, crusty) roll, the cover half being dipped liberally in the sauce.

The French-dip sandwich has spread to lunchrooms all over the country, gustatory proof of its appeal; and to the original Philippe's—still in its lowly warehouse district home—comes a continuous and popular pilgrimage of sandwich connoisseurs.



CONSTRUCTION WORKERS EATING LUNCH AT THE SHASTA DAM. SHASTA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA. (PHOTOGRAPH BY RUSSELL LEE)



AUNT SAMMY'S RECIPES

The following recipes are from the *Aunt Sammy's Radio Recipes* pamphlets distributed by the US government in the early part of the 20th century. Each radio station had their own Aunt Sammy, voiced by a local actress reading from a standardized script. The format of the show was playful and had a loose narrative arc, including appearances from Sammy's family and friends. The show was written by three women from the USDA: Ruth Van Deman, Josephine Hemphill, and Fanny Walker Yeatman. The target audience was primarily rural housewives.

Dozens of Aunt Sammy pamphlets have been digitized and are available on archive.org if you want to explore this curious blip on the American cultural radar a little further.

FRIED CARROTS AND APPLES

6 medium-sized carrots.
6 tart apples.
2 tablespoons fat.

1 tablespoon sugar.
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt.

Scrape the carrots and cut them lengthwise into thin slices. Pare the apples or leave the peelings on, as preferred, core, and cut into slices about a fourth of an inch thick. Place a single layer of the apples and the carrots in a skillet with the fat, cover tightly, and cook till well browned, turn, and brown the other side. Just before the cooking is finished, sprinkle with the salt and sugar. Serve on a hot platter, first a layer of carrots, then a layer of apples, so the two can be lifted together.

CELERY FRITTERS

2 cups celery, finely cut.
 $1\frac{3}{4}$ cups sifted soft wheat flour.
1 cup milk.

1 egg.
 $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt.
2 teaspoons baking powder.

Sift together the flour, salt, and baking powder, add the beaten egg and milk, then the celery. Fry by spoonfuls in a well-greased skillet. Drain on absorbent paper, and serve hot.

BAKED BANANAS WITH LEMON SAUCE

6 ripe bananas.
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sugar.
2 tablespoons melted butter.

2 tablespoons lemon juice.
 $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon salt.

Skin the bananas, scrape lightly to remove stringy portion, and split in half lengthwise. Place in a greased shallow baking dish and pour over them the liquid mixture. Bake in a moderate oven until brown. Serve from the dish.

SPICED PRUNES

1 pound large prunes.
1 quart water.
 $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon salt.
1 cup sugar.

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup vinegar.
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon whole allspice.
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon whole cloves.
3 small pieces stick cinnamon.

Select large prunes, wash well, and soak overnight in the water. Drain the water from the prunes and make a sirup of it and the sugar. Tie the spices in a cheesecloth bag and add to the sirup. Then add the prunes and cook for 15 to 20 minutes. Add the vinegar and cook about 10 minutes longer or until the sirup is fairly thick.

BAKED INDIAN PUDDING

5 cups milk.
 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup corn meal.
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup molasses.

1 teaspoon salt.
1 teaspoon ginger.

Cook milk and meal in a double boiler 20 minutes; add the molasses, salt, and ginger; pour into a buttered pudding dish and bake for 2 hours in slow oven. Serve hot with cream or vanilla ice cream.

SOUR CREAM PIE

1 cup sour cream.
1 cup sugar.
1 cup seeded raisins, cut fine.
2 eggs.

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon powdered cinnamon.
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon powdered cloves.
 $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon salt.
2 tablespoons vinegar.

Beat the eggs. Mix the spices with the sugar, and add to the eggs with the raisins, cream, salt, and vinegar. Beat well. Pour the mixture into a deep, pastry-lined pie pan. Moisten the outer rim of the pastry, and press the top crust over the lower one to hold in the custard. Bake in a moderate oven until golden brown.

BEEF CROQUETTES

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 pound upper round, or other lean beef. | $\frac{1}{2}$ medium-sized onion, grated. |
| 1 cup mashed potato, seasoned, or 1 cup thick cream sauce. | 1 egg. |
| 1 teaspoon salt. | 1 tablespoon parsley, chopped. |
| | Bread crumbs. |

Simmer the meat in a small quantity of water until tender. Then grind the meat, using the fine knife of the grinder. Add the other ingredients, but reserve the egg for dipping. Mix well. Form the meat into balls or mold into oblong or cone shapes. Dip into the beaten egg which has been well mixed with 1 tablespoon of water. Roll in finely sifted bread crumbs and place on a pan or board. Let stand for an hour or longer for the egg coating to dry. If the cream sauce is used as the binder, make it from 3 tablespoons flour and 1 cup milk.

Heat in an iron kettle any desired fat until hot enough to brown a bread crumb in 40 seconds. Then carefully place the croquettes in a wire basket, lower them slowly into the fat, and cook until a golden brown. As the croquettes are removed put them on a paper to absorb the excess fat and keep warm in the oven until all are prepared. Serve with a garnish of parsley and tomato sauce.

For an oven-browned instead of a fried croquette, use $1\frac{1}{2}$ instead of 1 cup of cream sauce in the mixture. This is a little more difficult to mold. Shape the croquettes as described, dip them in egg and crumbs, and place them on a greased pan to brown in a hot oven.

WATERMELON PRESERVE

- | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 2 pounds prepared watermelon rind. | 4 quarts water. |
| 2 quarts water. | 1 lemon sliced thin. |
| $\frac{3}{4}$ ounce lime. | Spices or ginger root. |
| 2 pounds sugar. | |

Cut the red portion of the watermelon from the rind. Remove the green outer skin and cut the white part into inch pieces. Soak the watermelon in the limewater, made by stirring the lime into the 2 quarts of water, and let it stand for $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours. At the end of that time, let the rind stand in fresh cold water for 1 hour. Drain and boil in clear water for $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours or until tender. Drain. Make a sirup of the sugar and the 4 quarts of water and drop the rind into it after it has reached the boiling point. Add the lemon and the spices. The spices will tend to darken the preserves but improve the flavor. Cook the preserves until the sirup is thick or until the temperature has reached 222° F. When the preserves are cooked, pack into sterilized jars, add sirup to cover, and seal.

KIDNEY STEW

1 beef kidney.
1 cup diced potato.
1 tablespoon flour.
1 tablespoon chopped parsley.
Few drops tabasco.

1 tablespoon thinly sliced onion.
 $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt.
1 tablespoon butter.
1 egg yolk

Wash the kidney well, remove the skin, and most of the fat. Cover with cold water and heat slowly to the boiling point, discard the water, and repeat the process until there is no strong odor and no scum on the water. Then add more water and simmer the kidney until tender. Cut the kidney into small pieces. Cook the diced potato and onion and add to the cut kidney. Thicken the liquid with the blended flour and butter, and cook for a few minutes longer. Take the stew from the stove and stir in the beaten egg yolk, the parsley, and tabasco. The heat of the stew will cook the egg sufficiently

OX TAIL STEW

1 ox tail.
 $2\frac{1}{2}$ quarts water.
4 carrots, diced.
2 turnips, diced.
2 onions, sliced.
1 large potato, diced.

2 tablespoons butter.
1 teaspoon Worcestershire or other seasoning.
Salt and pepper to taste.
1 tablespoon parsley, chopped fine.
Slices of lemon.

Wash the ox tail, cut in short lengths, and brown it in its own fat. Cook the onions in the butter, add to the meat with $1\frac{1}{2}$ quarts of the water, and simmer until the meat is tender. In the meantime, cook the carrots and turnips for 10 minutes in 1 quart of the water and add to the meat, with the water in which they cooked. Add also the potatoes, the sauce, and the salt and pepper. When the vegetables are soft, thicken the stew with a small quantity of flour mixed with a little cold water to a smooth paste. Cook until thickened. Sprinkle with the parsley and garnish with slices of lemon.

GRAHAM MUFFINS

1 cup milk.
 $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups coarse Graham flour or $1\frac{3}{4}$
cups more finely ground Graham.
2 to 4 tablespoons fat.

1 egg.
2 tablespoons baking powder.
1 to 2 tablespoons sugar.
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt.

Do not sift the Graham flour before measuring. Mix all the dry ingredients thoroughly. Beat the egg slightly and add it to the milk. Stir the combined milk and egg into the dry ingredients. Add the melted butter or other fat last. Bake the muffins in a hot oven (about 400° to 425° F.).

THE TRAMP'S GLOSSARY

The job-seeking train hoppers and hobos of the 1920s and 1930s developed an entire private language around food. The following is a just a small sample.

Alkee stiff a tramp that consumed alcohol

Alki alcohol

Alligator bait fried or stewed liver

Axle grease butter

Ball lump sandwiches or cake wrapped up and handed to a tramp

Beagles hot dogs

Big four a duck egg omelet

Black strap coffee

Bossy in a bowl beef stew

Bullets beans, when poorly cooked and hard

Cackleberries eggs

Catting in using another's campfire to cook

Clay on the shuck ears of corn rolled in clay and put to roast

Collar and shoulder style everything is put on the table and the hobo helps himself

Combination stew a jungle dish of vegetables and meat

Dead soldier an empty whiskey bottle lying beside the road

Doughnut philosopher a hobo who is satisfied with coffee and feed

Dukie anything to eat

Dynamiter one who sponged food off fellow hoboes

Exhibition meal a meal eaten at the doorstep (so neighbors can witness madam's generosity)

Eye opener an early morning drink

Fly light to miss a meal

Goozlum thick and gummy in substance (mud, food, etc.)

Graveyard stew hot milk and toast (for those of few or no teeth)

Grease ranch restaurant

Growler a can of beer

Gump chicken

Gut plunge a trip to the butcher to beg for meat for the mulligan

Guts meat, usually sausage

Hard oil butter
Ink cheap red wine
Irish turkey corned beef and cabbage
Load of culls a plate of hash
Lump a handout (a sack or package of food)
Mess moll a woman cook
Minister's face pig's head
Mud a) coffee; b) strong coffee mixed with weak milk
Mule corn alcohol
Mulligan stew hobo stew
Odd fellows three doughnuts and coffee
Oil of joy any strong drink
Pale vienna coffee made with cream instead of water
Pennsylvania salve apple butter
Peoria thin soup, generally potato water with salt
Pig's vest with buttons sow belly, or any fat bacon
Pile driver good strong coffee
Pin grease butter
Pot walloper a dish and pot washer
Punk and gut bread and sausage
Punk and plaster bread and butter
Red eye whiskey
Red lead catsup
Robbing the mail taking food or milk delivered at doorsteps early in the morning
Saddle blankets hot cakes
Sinker doughnut
Skoff to eat
Sky blue vegetable soup with little ingredients
Snail cinnamon roll
Sneaky pete cheap wine
Sop gravy
Speed balls wine
Spider a small frying pan with a long handle
Square a good meal
Stew builder a hobo camp cook
Submarines doughnuts
Substantials meat and potatoes, and bread and butter
Third rail whiskey
Toppings a) dessert at a meal; b) pastry
White mule uncolored moonshine whiskey
Wind pudding air (having nothing to eat is living on wind pudding)

Bread

*Oh, my heart it is just achin'
For a little bit of bacon
A hunk of bread, a little mug of brew
I'm tired of seein' scenery
Just lead me to a beanery
Where there's something more than only air to chew*

-Henry Herbert Knibbs
(1874-1945)

DINER SLANG

The 1930s saw the rise of the diner, and with it, a colorful lexicon built on visual puns and sly cultural references. The glossary below only scratches the surface, and there are hundreds of regional variations.

Cow feed salad
Bubble dancer dishwasher
Hockey puck well-done hamburger
Cluck and grunt eggs and bacon
Barley water beer
Motor oil syrup
First lady an order of ribs
Bow-wow hot dog
Two dots and a dash two fried eggs and a strip of bacon
Yum-yum sugar
Black cow chocolate milk or milkshake
Butcher's revenge meatloaf
Mike and Ike salt and pepper shakers
Eve with a lid on apple pie
Make it moo add milk to a coffee
Walk a cow through the garden burger with lettuce, tomato and onion
Cowboy with spurs western omelette with french fries
Swamp water soda made with all flavors available
Whistle berries baked beans
Dirty water coffee
Yellow paint mustard
Battery acid grapefruit juice
Adam and Eve on a raft two poached eggs on toast
Moo juice milk
Fish eyes tapioca pudding
Cow paste butter
George Eddy a customer who doesn't leave tips
Soup jockey waitress
Birdseed breakfast cereal
City juice water
Nervous pudding bowl of Jell-O
Noah's boy slice of ham
Bronx vanilla garlic
Hold the grass no lettuce
Frog sticks French fries



HOBO'S LULLABY

WRITTEN BY GOEBEL REEVES

POPULARIZED BY WOODY GUTHRIE

Go to sleep you weary hobo
Let the towns drift slowly by
Listen to the steel rails hummin'
That's the hobo's lullaby

Do not think 'bout tomorrow
Let tomorrow come and go
Tonight you're in a nice warm boxcar
Safe from all that wind and snow

I know the police cause you trouble
They cause trouble everywhere
But when you die and go to Heaven
You'll find no policemen there

So go to sleep you weary hobo
Let the towns drift slowly by
Listen to the steel rails hummin'
That's a hobo's lullaby

Right: Original illustration by Woody Guthrie



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